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Framing a 'social problem': Emotion in anti-abortion activists' depiction of the abortion
debate

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Abstract

Social psychological research on activism typically focuses on individuals' social identifications. We complement such research through exploring how activists frame an issue as a social problem. Specifically, we explore anti-abortion activists' representation of abortion and the abortion debate's protagonists so as to recruit support for the anti-abortion cause. Using interview data obtained with UK-based anti-abortion activists ($N=15$) we consider how activists characterised women having abortions, pro-abortion campaigners, and anti-abortion campaigners. In particular, we consider the varied ways in which emotion featured in the representation of these social actors. Emotion featured in different ways. Sometimes it was depicted as constituting embodied testament to the nature of reality. Sometimes it was depicted as blocking the rational appraisal of reality. Our analysis considers how such varied meanings of emotion shaped the characterisation of abortion and the abortion debate's protagonists such that anti-abortion activists were construed as speaking for women and their interests. We discuss how our analysis of the framing of issues as social problems complements and extends social psychological analyses of activism.

Keywords: Activism, framing, emotion talk, identity construction, abortion, anti-abortion argumentation

Social psychological studies of activism typically address individuals' social identifications (Klandermans, Sabucedo, Rodriguez, & de Weerd, 2002). For example, unless women identify as women, they are unlikely to seek to advance women's interests (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996), and unless they identify as activists, their commitment may be limited (Sturmer & Simon, 2004; Fielding, McDonald, & Louis, 2008). However, 'traditional' (non-feminist) women may also identify strongly as women and yet subscribe to different visions of womanhood (Condor, 1989). Awareness of such diversity of opinion has led some researchers to analyse activism in terms of people's identification with opinion-based group memberships (e.g., being pro- or anti-feminism) (Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds & Muntele, 2007). It has also encouraged others to consider the construction of identity and identity-related interest in mobilization rhetoric (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004; Reicher & Hopkins, 2000).

In this paper we complement such research with an analysis of how activists construct a social issue so as to define it as a social problem. We focus on abortion and explore how anti-abortion activists represent women's experience of abortion and the protagonists in the abortion debate. In particular, we explore how this representation is organized to imply that those who are concerned about women's interests should ally themselves with the anti-abortion cause. Whilst pro-abortion activists' constructions of abortion and the debate's protagonists could also be subjected to analysis, developments in anti-abortion argumentation make it a particularly interesting topic to explore: As will become apparent, this mobilization rhetoric features constructions of women's psychology and emotional experience which social psychology is particularly well-placed to explore.

Abortion in dispute

Many jurisdictions make provision for legal abortion. However, the topic remains contested. Thus, in the UK, Northern Ireland continues more restrictive policies, and in the USA, one of President Trump's first executive orders was to ban Federal money going to

international groups that performed or provided information on abortion (with enormous global impact for women's lives: Boseley, Maclean, & Ford, 2017). Arguments over abortion occur in legislative debates and court cases (Friedman, 2013). In jurisdictions where abortion is legal, the principle and practice of abortion also features in public debates initiated by anti-abortion activists seeking to recruit public support for legal restriction upon abortion practice.

Although the precise form to these debates varies according to national context (Morgan, 1989), a key issue of contestation concerns foetal personhood (and even where abortion is legal it is rarely considered as solely a healthcare issue: Purcell, Brown, Melville & McDaid, 2017). The language used in these debates (e.g., 'foetus' vs. 'unborn child') is strategically important and has been shown to shape audience response (Mikołajczak & Bilewicz, 2015). Moreover, the labels used to describe what the debate is all about - and thus the nature of debate's protagonists (and activist identities) - are important. Most obviously, characterising the debate as between those who are 'pro-life' versus 'anti-life', or between those who are 'pro-choice' versus 'anti-choice' has enormous significance for constituting the heart of the debate and the identities of those involved in the dispute. Indeed, such talk helps constitute the positions around which opinion-based group memberships (Bliuc, et al., 2007) can develop and become a basis for action. As a corollary, it is easy to see how the terms (e.g., 'pro-life', 'pro-choice') used to characterise the protagonists can themselves become a topic of strategic significance and topics of contestation. (In the light of this we have, for analytic reasons, labelled the positions we explore as 'anti-abortion' and 'pro-abortion').

Over time, the abortion debate has undergone several developments. One concerns the use of foetal imagery. In much anti-abortion material the foetus is depicted in empty space (an iconic image taken by Lennart Nilson appeared in *Life* magazine, April 30, 1965, was captioned "Like an astronaut in his capsule the fetus floats in its amniotic sac"). Such depictions of the foetus as an autonomous (and thus rights-bearing individual) are

accomplished through rendering the pregnant woman invisible - both literally and metaphorically (Condit, 1990; Petchesky, 1987; Stabile, 1992). This visual imagery is rhetorically potent: although the images are selected and cropped they have the appearance of neutral objectivity. This allows the anti-abortion case to be presented in an apparently scientific guise (rather than in terms of more obviously contestable claims based on religious belief, etc.).

Yet, the absence of the woman in such imagery has an Achilles' heel: It leaves anti-abortion activists vulnerable to the criticism of ignoring women's interests (Hopkins, Reicher & Saleem, 1996). Addressing this weakness, anti-abortion activists have sought to construct abortion as damaging women. Key to this development is the concept of Post Abortion Syndrome (Speckhard & Rue, 1992). This is modelled on the concept of Post-[Psychology Today looks at Traumatic](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/trauma) Stress Disorder and is strategically significant because it implies abortion results in long-term psychiatric disorder. That is, it problematizes abortion through reference to a medicalized (rather than overtly moral) discourse and implies that abortion does not only harm the "unborn child" but women as well.

The wider social processes behind the development and dissemination of this characterisation of abortion as emotionally damaging for women have been explored by those interested in the sociology of social movement organisation (Rohlinger, 2002; Rose, 2011; Trumpy, 2014); contemporary legal decision-making (Leinwand, 2009; Ziegler, 2013); and political science (Saurette & Gordon, 2013; Zhang & Counts, 2016). They have also received attention from scholars engaged in feminist politics and strategy (Cannold, 2002).

Epidemiological research actually reveals little evidence for such a syndrome (Biggs, Upadhyay, McCulloch, & Foster (2016); Dadlez & Andrews, 2010; Munk-Olsen, Laursen, Pedersen, Lidegaard, & Mortensen, 2011; Robinson, Stotland, Russo, Lang, & Occhiogrosso, 2009). However, it continues to feature prominently in anti-abortion argumentation (Kelly,

2014). There are several reasons for this. First, talk of Post-Abortion Syndrome allows activists to characterise individuals as damaged at a deep level (even when there is little obvious manifestation of such damage: Hopkins, Reicher & Saleem, 1996). Second, a medicalised account of the putative physical and psychological costs of abortion is less obviously dependent on (more easily contested) moral precepts as the basis for opposition to abortion (Hopkins, Reicher, & Saleem, 1996; Lee, 2003). Third, it allows anti-abortion activists to represent themselves as championing women's interests (Rose, 2011). Indeed, whereas pro-abortion activists often represented the protagonists in the abortion debate as 'pro-choice' vs 'anti-choice', anti-abortion activists have sought to re-represent the terms of the debate so that they are no longer constituted as 'anti-choice' but rather as 'pro-woman' (Cannold, 2002; Rose, 2011).

The construction of social problems

We are interested in how social psychological analyses of activism (which typically focus on individuals' level of group identification) can be augmented and complemented with a qualitative analysis of how issues are framed as social problems and the debate's protagonists (and, as a corollary, wider constituencies of opinion) defined.

There is a well-established sociological literature on the framing of social problems. This emphasises that framings perform an interpretative function, "simplifying and condensing" the "world out there" (Benford & Snow, 2000). This literature also emphasises that framings are permeated with strategic purpose: They attribute responsibility for particular states of affairs to particular social actors ('diagnostic framing'), propose solutions ('prognostic framing'), and are "intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow & Benford 1988: p.198). Typically, such sociological work focuses on the organisational processes underlying the

development and dissemination of particular framings and dialogue with social psychology has been limited (Jasper, 2017).

However, social psychology has much to offer the analysis of framing. First, framing issues as social problems often entails the construction and dissemination of (lay) representations of psychological functioning (e.g., emotional distress). Such accounts can be rhetorically potent because they have a common-sense feel and are not so obviously ‘political’ (Hopkins, Reicher & Saleem, 1996) and social psychology is well-placed to explore such rhetoric and its strategic significance. Second, analyses of mobilisation rhetoric show that defining the nature of an issue is intimately bound up with defining the categories of people involved, such that to define the protagonists in any controversy is to go a long way to framing the issue itself. This is illustrated in Reicher & Hopkins’s (1996a) analysis of two competing constructions of a strike which involved very different understandings of the protagonists in the dispute. According to one, the strike entailed a small governmental elite attacking the mass of ordinary people and established British traditions (and all who identified with them). According to the other, it involved a militant minority attacking British democracy (and all who identified with it). That is, the characterisation of the protagonists in the strike was key to the constitution of the strike’s meaning and to creating social categories that the wider public could identify with (thus mobilising wider support for or against the strike).

The present research builds on the above and explores how references to emotion may feature in the framing of abortion and the characterisation of the debate’s protagonists.

Emotion and the framing process

As noted above, the idea that abortion has a heavy emotional cost features prominently in anti-abortion argumentation. Here we do not investigate the validity of this claim but consider how talk about emotion can feature in the characterization of abortion and the debate’s protagonists’ ability to speak for women and their interests. Accordingly, we

draw upon social psychological analyses of how emotion-related talk can be important in the representation of social actors and social relationships.

Such analyses make the point that emotion-related talk can be important because it implies particular identities. For example, Gergen (2005) notes that it is difficult to imagine how the emotion of jealousy could be expressed at the sight of a sunset or a red traffic light and that this is because jealousy is associated with particular identity narratives (e.g., “jilted lover”). Thus, the attribution of emotional states to social actors can be strategically important because it implies the relevance of particular identities and social relations (rather than others) (Edwards, 1995).

Researchers have also noted that talk about emotion can be a resource in interaction accomplishing various actions (Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012; Wilkinson & Kitinger, 2006). For example, Locke (2004) shows how sportspeople use emotion to explain away poor performances, and Schneider (2014) shows how in discussions of the homeless, individuals may use emotion terms to build a moral identity for themselves which paradoxically allows social inequality to continue. Moreover, research shows that emotion-related talk can be a flexible resource in the construction of reality (Childs & Hepburn, 2015; Edwards, 1999). For example, emotion can be represented as compromising people’s ability to reason, with the corollary that attributing emotions to others can work to imply their position is ill-founded and discrepant with reality. Yet, emotion can also be represented as offering an unmediated and embodied testament to the nature of reality, with the corollary that attributing emotions to others can be a means to imply that their emotional reaction offers a direct insight into the nature of reality.

Here, we focus on how emotion features in activists’ constructions of various social actors and how this contributes to the framing of abortion such that it is anti-abortion activists who really understand the reality of abortion and can represent women’s interests.

The present research

Our analysis is based on interview data obtained from anti-abortion activists in Scotland. We make no claims about the degree to which their accounts capture abortion's reality. Nor do we make claims about the representativeness of this sample or the frequency with which the arguments we document are voiced elsewhere (the debate takes different forms in different cultural contexts). Rather, we consider how interviewees framed the abortion debate such that they are represented as knowing the reality of abortion and thus as being in a position to represent women's interests. Drawing on social psychological analyses of mobilisation rhetoric (Reicher & Hopkins, 2000, 1996ab; Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004) we explore: i. the representation of women's experience; ii. the representation of pro-abortion activists and abortion providers (who also claim to represent women's interests); and iii. the representation of anti-abortion activists and their relationship with women. We also draw upon analyses of emotion-related talk (Childs & Hepburn, 2015; Edwards, 1999) to show how emotion talk can help ground particular versions of reality over others and so establish a particular framing of abortion as a social problem. Here, we highlight how emotion can be represented in different ways (sometimes as a testament to the nature of reality, sometimes as an impediment to the perception of that reality). That is, we consider how emotions can be construed so as to imply that i. anti-abortion constructions of the debate are evinced and warranted by women's emotional reaction to abortion; ii. pro-abortion activism and provision is founded on irrational emotion; and iii. anti-abortion activists appreciate and represent women's interests.

Method

Participants Interviews were conducted with 15 anti-abortion activists (nine female, six male). Twelve participants were between 18-26 years and three were in their mid-40s. Six were undergraduate students, two were post-graduate students, and seven were employed.

Seven were Scottish, three were Irish, and five were English. All lived in Scotland and were contacted through websites and social media (e.g. Facebook) frequented by anti-abortion activists.

Interviews The interviews were semi-structured (M length = 44 minutes, $SD = 24$; total duration = 617 minutes) and took place in public settings (e.g., cafés) or participants' work offices. Thirteen were interviewed individually and two together. Given the emphasis in contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric on the psychological damage experienced by women having an abortion the interview topics concerned the personal and social impact of abortion. This entailed exploring the psychology of women after an abortion and the similarities / differences between the experience of abortion and miscarriage. It also entailed exploring interviewees' depiction of how they (anti-abortion activists) and others (e.g., medical professionals, pro-abortion activists) related to women having an abortion. The interviews were conducted by the first author (male) who explained that he wished to learn about the interviewees' attitudes and opinions. The interviews were conducted in a friendly and respectful manner and in a manner appropriate for a controversial subject (with the interviewer introducing counter-arguments). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Analytic Approach We focused on how our interviewees constructed the experiences of women having abortion and those protagonists who were pro- or anti-abortion. Given previous work on contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric (Hopkins, Reicher, & Saleem, 1996; Hopkins, Zeedyk, & Raitt, 2005) we anticipated there would be much talk of women being emotionally damaged by abortion and we were interested in how this would be relevant for the depiction of pro- and anti-abortion activists involved in the debate. However, at the outset to our research we did not anticipate the extent to which emotion would feature as a means to warrant particular versions of reality (Childs & Hepburn, 2015; Edwards, 1999). Rather, our

interest in the varied meanings of emotion (e.g., as embodied testament to reality vs. impediment to appraising reality) emerged through the process of analysis as we considered how anti-abortion activists depicted themselves as most able to represent women's interests.

In common with other research (e.g., Ntontis, Drury, Amlôt, Rubin, & Williams, 2018) our analysis therefore involved two elements. The first involved a theoretically-driven focus on the construction of women having an abortion, those who support/provide abortion and those who oppose it (see Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b). Extracts relevant to such themes were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, references to emotion were noted. The second element to the analysis, involved drawing on the tradition of discursive psychology to consider how such references to emotion worked to support or challenge particular versions of reality (Childs & Hepburn, 2015; Edwards, 1999).

Our analysis is structured in three sections. First, we consider the depiction of the emotional state of women undertaking abortion. Here we explore how emotion was construed as offering a direct and unmediated insight into the reality of abortion (here, the killing of an 'unborn child'). Second, we consider the depiction of the emotional state of pro-abortion activists and those who provide abortion. Here we focus on how such depictions worked to imply that these social actors are unable to rationally appraise the reality of abortion (such that their message was psychologized: Papastamou, 1986). Third, we consider how anti-abortionists represented themselves as appreciating and caring about women's experience of abortion.

When reporting extracts we note the interviewees' number and sex (e.g., 'Int1M' is interviewee number 1 and male). Excluded text is denoted with square brackets, i.e., [...]. Following Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie's (1999) guidance, our analysis is grounded in multiple examples.

Analysis

Section 1. Women's experiences

All the interviewees characterized women as suffering emotionally after an abortion. Often such attributions of psychological distress were naturalized through reference to the experience of miscarriage. For example, when the interviewer commented that they had heard that abortion “can cause mental health problems”, one interviewee (IntM9) spontaneously invoked the example of miscarriage. Specifically, the interviewee replied:

Extract 1

IntM9: Yes, absolutely because essentially it is the death of the child that is growing, that's developing and if you're going to have emotional responses when it's done through natural causes you're also going to have emotional responses when it's done through unnatural causes, it's only natural.

Of particular interest here is how the interviewee's claim to know about others' emotions is established through reference to the (culturally recognized) sense of loss associated with miscarriage. Indeed, this parallel implies that emotional distress after abortion is to be expected (“it's only natural”). Moreover, this *naturalized* reaction is construed as speaking volumes about the foetus: it is a “child that is growing”. Other interviewees elaborated on the inevitability of emotional distress in ways that more explicitly constituted the foetus as a child. For example, one interviewee argued:

Extract 2

Int12F: the women that I see, there's the grief, the natural grief reaction that's there and “why am I grieving for a choice that I made?” this logical, and so the instincts of a woman that are there, and she's got to try and deal with them and the symptoms that can arise from that are drug abuse or promiscuity and a destructive lifestyle and at the

very core there's self-hatred so they want to punish themselves, other one having [inaudible] another one full-time drinking they think but each bad relationship or situation that failed it reinforcing how bad they feel about themselves, how they may cope with that is "my life became my career" after the first abortion, and many talk about whatever they are doing has to be successful because then the abortion will be for nothing so there's a lot in the aftermath [...] and living life is people-pleasing, that gets worse and they'll struggle with that, maybe some get to burn out, "please like me, I'll do what you want"

Here, there is a sense of a strong (inevitable) emotional response to abortion (a "natural grief reaction") which speaks volumes about the enormity of one's actions. Of particular interest is the contrast between the reality of this embodied and authentic emotional experience and the rhetoric of choice which leads to a sense of puzzlement ("why am I grieving for a choice that I made?"). That is, there is sense in which emotional experience is depicted as testament to the reality of abortion: the status of the foetus as unborn child is manifested in post-abortive "grief" and such talk is again naturalized through locating her emotional reactions in a narrative of biological motherhood (e.g., the maternal "instincts" that "she's got to try and deal with"). Furthermore, the woman's emotions are characterized as entailing "self-hate" which implies the woman's feelings testify to *her* knowing she has done wrong. Again, this works to characterize psychological distress as revealing much about reality: the pregnant woman is a mother with an unborn child. Also, it is noteworthy that the manifestations of this painful emotional state are diverse: Women "punish themselves" in all manner of ways, from the 'deviant' (e.g., drinking) to the 'conventional' (e.g., building a career) which works to generalize the impression of harm, even if the 'symptoms' involve (apparent) 'success'.

In Extract 3 the inevitability of distress, is even more explicitly developed through

reference to the “natural” bond between “woman” and “child”:

Extract 3

Int13F: somebody’s life has ended, there is a death ehm and that death has taken place inside of the mother and that bond was there whether the mother wanted it to be there or not whatever difficult circumstances ehm you know that was still her child and that bond is broken in a way that should never happen naturally, so not, that baby is meant to be nurtured but you know the women expect to be a safe place and the mother’s intuition is to protect again even if she wants it or not, it’s deeply in, it’s a mother’s intuition to, it’s in her body and everything in her is telling her, is built to protect this child, so to break that relationship and that bond in such a way. An abortion procedure is a horrific thing and I don’t think everybody knows you know [what] actually happens during an abortion it really can be horrific and so honestly I don’t think any women cannot be affected by something like that I just don’t think it’s possible. However that manifests itself deep down I think there is an impact.

Here again the interviewee offers an extended account of the basis for a woman’s post-abortion distress rooted in a narrative of biological motherhood (distress being bound up with the unnatural act of the “mother” breaking the “bond” with her “child”). Furthermore, and in a similar manner to extract 2, talk of ‘deep’ emotional damage (whatever the individual thinks or reasons) allows generalization (“honestly I don’t think any women cannot be affected”). That is, there is something of a contrast between what happens on the surface and “deep down” such that regardless of surface manifestation, emotional damage must be presumed. Indeed, this experience of damage is thoroughly embodied (“it’s in her body and everything in her is telling her, is built to protect this child”) and arises regardless of what one thinks or wishes (“whether the mother wanted it to be there or not”). Again,

emotion rooted in “a mother’s intuition” testifies to an unavoidable reality: the foetus is “still her baby”.

Other interviewees used the contrast between the embodied reality of emotional pain and the conscious reasoning that leads women to undertake abortion to depict the woman as suffering a two-fold blow. Thus, one interviewee (IntF10) explained that the embodied reality of emotion was especially painful because it contrasted so dramatically with the vocabulary of reasoned choice in abortion:

Extract 4

IntF10: If you just commit something at a time perhaps it’s right at that time but then it can still affect you like cause some woman does something that what she thought was best she might still have absolutely not going to make it an actual part of her she does have symptoms of regret and she’s going to say “Why am I feeling like this because I did what was right” it’s going to be even more confusing for her she did [what] she thought was right but she still feels she’s done something wrong you know, it’s, so I think you can, I’m not saying this, “you can’t make a rational choice”, but, you can, but, so the thing, just because something is rational and logical doesn’t mean it’s right, turns out it’s always, always best.

Here there is an explicit contrast between thought and emotion in which the latter is privileged as evidencing the nature of reality: Although the woman may think and reason that she is “absolutely not going to make it an actual part of her”, such reasoning is powerless in the face of the reality revealed by her emotional reaction (“symptoms of regret”, the sense “she’s done something wrong”). Such (apparently authentic, natural, and unmediated) emotions reveal the reasoning behind the decision to abort to be misguided (“just because something is rational and logical doesn’t mean it’s right”). Furthermore, echoing themes in extract 2, this contrast between the unanticipated emotional “symptoms of regret” and the

reasoning that led to the decision in the first place only adds to the emotional pain experienced (“it’s going to be even more confusing for her”). All this works to establish a sense of reality that is attested to by women’s emotional pain and which cannot be circumvented by so-called reason and logic.

Whereas the negative emotions attributed to women were construed as evidencing the reality of abortion, instances of positive emotional reaction were not accorded such status. Rather, positive emotional reactions (such as any reported sense of ‘relief’) were re-represented as superficial and transient. Take the following:

Extract 5

Int9M: So I imagine for some women it [an abortion] can be a freeing experience emotionally. I wouldn’t consider it a freeing experience in terms of reason but I imagine some women, perhaps those who are career-driven or they have certain goals in life, very fixated on certain objectives and nothing is getting in their way, I imagine it can seem freeing but I imagine deep down really looking at inside of the person you would find some hurt there and you know you have to ask why they’ve got such a fixation and objective in the first place. Because that would suggest a certain, instability is the wrong word, but you get what I mean by using a certain instability to begin with but not quite instability but a certain things aren’t always quite in place.

This interviewee acknowledges the existence of positive abortion-related emotions but implies they should not be taken at face value. Instead of revealing something about the authority of reason (“I wouldn’t consider it a freeing experience in terms of reason”) “relief” is construed as superficial with the “hurt” of abortion again implied through reference to other “deep down” (negative) emotional states. Indeed, rather than a sense of relief being taken at face-value, it is taken as diagnostic of a psychological problem (e.g., “you have to

ask why they've got such a fixation and objective in the first place"; "certain things aren't always quite in place").

Thus far, we have considered how women undertaking abortion are characterized as distressed and how the interviewees' claims about others' emotional experiences were constructed. We saw how talk of instincts and their denial contributed to a sense that distress is inevitable and how talk of 'hidden' or 'deep' emotion generalized the outcome of distress to the many (rather than the few who present with problems). Moreover, we noted the manner in which emotional experience was construed as speaking volumes about the reality of abortion. That is, women's putative emotional distress was construed as evincing the foetus's status as an 'unborn child'. In the next section we consider how those campaigning in support of abortion provision were represented, and how emotion featured in their characterisation.

Section 2. Pro-abortion protagonists

Unsurprisingly, activists of any persuasion must counter the arguments developed by their opponents and this often entails questioning their opponents' ability to speak on behalf of those they claim to represent (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b, 2000). Here, we consider how anti-abortionists characterized those they saw as promoting abortion. This included abortion activists, the more general category of 'feminists' (assumed to support access to legal abortion) and, also of medics who (because they provide abortion) were judged to contribute to the normalization and sanitization of abortion. Repeatedly, these actors' claim to act in the interests of women were questioned. For example, one interviewee argued:

Extract 6

Int13F: there has been real injustice to women, that they've been told that they'll be fine, it's not fine and it's not good for them, it's really not an empowerment for women, it's all just a lie

The argument that pro-abortion activists misinformed women about the reality of abortion was developed in various ways. One of these was through the attribution of emotion to those assumed to be pro-abortion. Yet, if so far we have seen emotion represented as embodied testament to reality, in this section we will see emotion represented in a manner that psychologises (Papastamou, 1986) pro-abortion attitudes. For example, one interviewee (IntF12) characterized those who were pro-abortion as having their judgement clouded by their emotions:

Extract 7

IntF12: Ahm so with the medics and the the feminist movement and I would say like there is a huge area of denial and confusion for them about like they are looking on one level where women are in society and the culture that they live in but they're struggling with the emotions and I see that in the feminist movement and maybe it's a generalization I'm making but there are so many hurt women who feel abused by men in whatever sense work / home life relationship that they can't be more angry about that and that influences how they view abortion.

Here, the pro-abortion opposition are depicted as emotionally damaged. Specifically, feminist activists are depicted as feeling “hurt” and “abused” by men with their emotions distorting their capacity to evaluate properly the reality of abortion. That is, although concerned about women's experience (“they are looking on one level where women are in society and the culture that they live in”), their own emotional damage distorts their judgement. Thus, in contrast from what we saw in Section 1 (where emotion was construed as offering insight into reality), the attribution of emotion to pro-abortion activists explains their position as rooted in their personal “denial and confusion”.

A similar construal of emotion was apparent in another interviewee's argument that

pro-abortion activists were unable to enter into rational dialogue. One (Int8F) argued that although feminist pro-abortion campaigners sounded assertive, they were emotionally vulnerable and so “can’t even entertain some sort of discussion”. They continued:

Extract 8

Int8F: I see these women they’re so angry at men you know feminists are so angry at the world and I think “God men have broken you down” like “the world has broken you down and you trust no one now” and I think “I need to keep loving you” because I can’t like “you need to know that you are, you know, you are better than, you know all the stuff you set yourselves up for. I know you feel like you are taking your power back but you are just making yourselves more vulnerable”. I feel you know they don’t know how to give in themselves they don’t know how to love properly like there is walls and walls and walls and walls and they are getting more and more fearful confrontation can’t even confront them anywhere cause you’re so afraid [...] I see vulnerable women who are afraid, you know they are hurting, you know they don’t want any more hurting in their life and they fear people telling them they are wrong, it’s like they can’t even entertain some sort of discussion, something that is quite harmless in itself, ’cause they are so broken, so angry you know.

Again, we see pro-abortion activists’ position psychologized (e.g., “the world has broken you down and you trust no one now”). Indeed, depicted as “vulnerable women who are afraid” and “angry at the world”, pro-abortion activists are characterized as unable to enter into reasoned discussion because they “fear people telling them they are wrong” and “can’t even entertain some sort of discussion [] ’cause they are so broken, so angry you know”). Again, there is something of a contrast with the characterization of emotion apparent in Section 1 (where emotion was construed as embodied testament to the nature of reality). Here, emotion is construed as blocking proper engagement with (and rational discussion of)

the reality of abortion: “they don’t want any more hurting in their life and they fear people telling them they are wrong”.

A similar account was developed by another (Int5M) who argued that many pro-abortion activists had themselves undergone abortions and that the resulting emotional distress motivated their pro-abortion campaigning. The context was set by the contribution from their co-interviewee (Int6F) who commented that abortion-related damage “manifests itself in many different ways, doesn’t it? And it stays often repressed for years”. Building on this, and assuming that pro-abortion activists had themselves experienced abortion, the interviewee (Int5M) proceeded to contrast the tenor of anti-abortion activism which exhibited a calm, reasoned judgement, and the “shouting and screaming” of pro-abortion activist. This was illustrated through reference to the demonstrations organized by the two opposing protagonists (which the interviewee referred to as “pro-choice” and “pro-life”):

Extract 9

Int5M: Come to a demonstration and you will see (laughs) because remember what I said when I was twelve we were a silent demonstration and the pro-choice is not so silent. Now if you think that in terms of you know “whose point of view prevails in Britain at the moment?” It’s not ours. And what I’m saying is “who should be happy?” And who should be shouting and screaming about injustice? Because from our point of view there are two hundred thousand children in Britain year in, year out, since 1967, eight million children in Britain have been killed by the state. Now it’s surprising that I can even stay that calm but it’s very rare that you will see pro-lifers shouting, screaming, use an abusive language. [...] So what I’m saying is, you know, I think when you look at pro-choice organizations and you listen to the language and you look at their behaviour and I suppose you become, you perhaps become pro-choice before an abortion and perhaps you become pro-choice after an abortion, ahm, I look at that and think “does abortion make you happy”? Does it make you into at

peace with yourself? And well, look and draw your own conclusions.

Here, there is a contrast between the calm stance of anti-abortion activists even as they contemplate the fate of all those “children” “killed by the state (“it’s very rare that you will see pro-lifers shouting, screaming, use an abusive language”) and the emotional state of pro-abortion activists. Indeed, the emotion attributed to pro-abortion activists undermines any claim that their position is based on a reasoned engagement with the reality. Rather than being “at peace” and “happy”, anti-abortion activists are characterized as “shouting and screaming” with this the manifestation of deep-rooted emotional distress. Thus, the emotions attributed to pro-abortion activists decouples their protest from the logic of feminist analyses of reproductive rights and re-presents it in terms of emotional disorder. Again the point is that just as the attribution of emotion can be used to imply a position is rooted in the experience of reality (Section 1), so it can be used to imply a position is discrepant from rational judgement.

Section 3: Anti-abortion protagonists

In this section we focus on the depiction of anti-abortion activists. Complementing the characterisation of pro-abortion protagonists as unable to represent women’s interests, our interviewees emphasized their own care for women. This could be done through contesting the designation ‘feminist’. For example, one (Int10F) argued:

Extract 10

Int10F: there is a saying that you can’t be a pro-life feminist but I would say you can’t be a pro-abortion feminist because I think abortion obviously damages women, hurts women [...] so to me it’s very important to be feminist, pro-woman and pro-life, I think it’s the same thing, it’s what’s best for the woman and the child.

Such re-appropriations of the designation ‘feminist’ turn around the common accusation that anti-abortion activists are unconcerned about the fate of the women faced with an unplanned pregnancy. Rather they want “what’s best for the woman” and this claim was developed through reference to anti-abortion activists’ concern for others’ putative emotions. For example, one (Int2F) explained:

Extract 11

Int2F: I think a lot of the pro-life movement is also about helping these women to come to terms and to peace with what they’ve experienced and I wouldn’t be happy to see anyone go through that at all.

Elaborating on their concerns for women’s well-being some interviewees emphasized how their activism entailed building a therapeutic emotional bond. For example, in extract 8 the interviewee (Int8F) presented themselves as reaching out emotionally (“I need to keep loving you”) to pro-abortion activists who they had characterized as emotionally damaged (“hurting”, “fearful”, “they don’t know how to love properly”). In similar vein, another spoke of anti-abortion activists having a close emotional bond with women who had actually experienced an abortion. For example, one spoke of the emotional “fellowship” between those in the anti-abortion movement and women who had undergone abortion. Referring to the latter she argued “there is a lot of women that say ‘I can’t believe you feel the same way as me’ and it’s fellowship you know they suddenly realize that”:

Extract 12

Int8F: there was actually one girl I had been friends with on Facebook ehm in an abortion recovery care and health line page and when she saw it she said to me “I had an abortion quite a few years ago and I had no one to turn to” she said “I didn’t realize that there are people out there that wanted to talk to me and listen to me” she said “I felt so lonely after it”.

Another interviewee (IntF12) who had personal experience of abortion developed this account. She explained that after her own abortion she was drawn to anti-abortionists who “were speaking about post-abortion syndrome as they call it, and as those women spoke I felt ‘they are talking about my life’ that’s what got me interested”. Moreover, she continued that this drew her to help other women. In her words:

Extract 13

IntF12: and what the office here in [excluded location] was saying “would you be willing to come in for maybe an afternoon because we get calls and we don’t know what to do for these women”. Well neither did we, neither did I, apart from listening and giving some identification as to their feelings.

Again, this account implies that anti-abortion activists are well-placed to help address women’s emotional experience. Just as anti-abortion activists respected her experiences (they were “talking about my life”), she herself also respected others’ emotional experiences (“listening and giving some identification as to their feelings”). Indeed, whereas pro-abortion activists’ emotional experience of abortion was construed as blocking their ability to communicate (Section 2), there is a sense in which her emotions allowed insight and facilitated therapeutic support with emotionally damaged women.

The wider corollary of this definition of the protagonists is that rather than the debate being framed as being between feminists and anti-abortion activists, it is re-framed as between women-centred anti-abortion activists and pro-abortion activists and providers. In contrast to the latter, the former do not misrepresent abortion or deny women’s experience. Rather they recognise and validate their emotional experiences and are therefore well-placed to champion women’s real interests.

Discussion

Much social psychological research on activism focuses on individuals' social identifications (e.g., as a woman, as a feminist). We complement such work through providing an analysis of how activists frame a particular practice (abortion) as constituting a social problem. We show how the characterization of various social actors (women having an abortion, pro-abortion protagonists, anti-abortion protagonists) (re)frames the abortion debate and the parties involved so as to imply that if you are concerned about women's interests you should ally with the anti-abortion camp.

As explained earlier, given developments in anti-abortion argumentation we expected reference to the putative emotional distress of abortion (Cannold, 2002; Lee, 2003; Rose, 2011). However, in the process of analysis we were alerted to how references to emotion featured in the characterization of various social actors. First, women were depicted as emotionally damaged by a termination and this emotional distress was represented as providing direct (embodied) evidence of the reality to abortion. That is, their emotions were depicted as testifying to the reality of the foetus as an 'unborn child'. Second, the emotions attributed to pro-abortion activists and those involved in abortion provision were represented as impeding their rational appraisal of reality. This psychologized (and as a corollary, de-politicised) pro-abortion protagonists' stance. Third, anti-abortion activists were depicted as more properly appreciating women's experiences and as being ready and able to help women. Taken together, whereas a framing of the abortion debate as between those who were 'pro-choice' vs. 'anti-choice' implies that those concerned about women's interests should be pro-abortion (in the sense of supporting reproductive rights), the framing presented here does the opposite. Women are depicted as victims of abortion and anti-abortion activists as understanding and representing women's real interests. As a corollary, this framing implies those concerned about women's interests should ally with the anti-abortion position.

The distinctive contribution of our approach to emotion may be gauged by comparison with other research on activism. Typically, social psychological interest in emotion considers how emotional experience motivates activist commitment (e.g., Leach, Iyer & Pedersen, 2006) or can be a basis for group self-categorisation (Livingstone, Shepherd, Spears, & Manstead, 2016). Yet, some research addresses activists' attribution of emotion to others. For example, Merola and McGlone (2011) investigated how the protagonists in the abortion debate attributed emotions to themselves and their opponents through reference to the established conceptual contrast between primary and secondary emotions (in which the latter are more closely associated with being human: Demoulin, et al., 2004). Merola and McGlone report that activists attributed more secondary emotions to their own side than the other which they interpret as showing a mutual dehumanisation of the protagonists' adversaries. Whilst such work helps explain how emotion attributions contribute to the development of ideological conflict, our work makes a different contribution. We show how references to emotion can work to establish and warrant a particular (strategically significant) framing of the abortion debate and the protagonists' identities in which the women having abortions and anti-abortion activists know the reality of abortion whereas pro-abortion activists are unable to appraise this reality rationally.

Inevitably our contribution is context-dependent. Our research was conducted in the UK and in other national settings abortion may be framed in different terms (e.g., national identity: Kozłowska, Béland, & Lecours, 2016). Also, although there is good evidence that the characterisation of abortion as psychologically damaging is a prominent feature of contemporary anti-abortion argumentation in the UK and the US (e.g., Cannold, 2002; Lee, 2003), we cannot assume emotion will always feature in the way we observed here (e.g., in psychologizing pro-abortion protagonists). Rather we would simply repeat the observation that talk about emotions can be a flexible rhetorical resource in warranting particular versions of reality (Childs & Hepburn, 2015; Edwards, 1999). Also, we only consider activists' talk

about emotion and we do not know how such talk could be influential in shaping public understandings of abortion and the abortion debate's protagonists (let alone the degree to which individuals may come to identify with the anti-abortion constituency). Such issues could be addressed in experimental paradigms.

Future research could also investigate how would-be activists are socialised into particular ways of talking about emotion (sociological studies have begun to address these issues: Groves, 1995; Husain & Kelly, 2016) and how collective engagement in such talk could facilitate the development of activist identities (see McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009). This could be complemented by analyses of how such constructions are affirmed through activist social practices. For example, Husain and Kelly (2016) present an ethnographic analysis of how women who have had abortions and who attended an anti-abortion group were led through a series of increasingly public group rituals in which they were encouraged to represent their abortion experience in the group-approved manner (such that they transitioned into becoming anti-abortion activists). Research could also address the argumentative resources available for women who have had abortion to frame their decision and experience in alternative (more positive) terms (Beynon-Jones, 2017; Purcell, Brown, Melville & McDaid, 2017) and contest the idea that abortion contradicts the 'essential nature' of women (Kumar, Hessini, & Mitchell, 2009). This is particularly important as there is evidence that if there is an association between abortion and psychological distress it is bound up with (negative) societal representations of abortion and the stigma these engender (O'Donnell, O'Carroll & Toole, 2018).

Yet, though much remains, we have shown talk about emotion is worthy of particular attention. Talk about emotion can be used to constitute a group's interests and who can best articulate and advance those interests. Moreover, as emotion can be represented as direct embodied testament to the nature of reality (as a means to privilege certain positions) or as an impediment to the reasoned evaluation of reality (as a means to undermine others' positions),

it can be a potentially potent means to characterize a debate's protagonists in strategically advantageous ways.

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